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ABSTRACT

To provide normative data concerning what actually occurs during initial classroom interaction on the university level, a study described the first day activities of multiple classrooms across the academy at a large midwestern university. The following research questions were addressed: (1) what introductory material does the instructor provide? (2) what information related to course policies and procedures is provided? (3) what course content is conveyed? (4) what type of personal information does the instructor disclose? and (5) what is the relationship between first day interaction and initial student satisfaction with a university course? During the first week of a 16-week semester, participants were asked to complete the questionnaire during or immediately following the first session of their chosen class. A total of 251 observations of 145 instructors representing 31 academic departments in 6 colleges were included in the survey. The questionnaire consisted of both closed and open ended questions. Results indicated that instructors furnished both general course information and information relevant to a student's success and survival as he/she begins a class. It appeared, however, that instructors disclosed little personal information and did not use interactive strategies on the first day of class. (Eight tables of data are included.) (NH)

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Together Again for the First Time:
A Descriptive Study of the First Day of Class

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Abstract

The current investigation provides descriptive data on messages communicated during initial classroom interactions within the university setting. Results indicate that instructors furnish both general course information and information relevant to a students success and survival as they begin a class. It appears, however, that instructors disclose little personal information and do not use interactive strategies on the first day. Some of these instructor messages and instructional strategies correlate with positive student attitudes towards the course and lead to higher student satisfaction on the first day.

Together Again for the First Time:
A Descriptive Study of the First Day of Class

The first day of class, like most first impressions of activities, persons, or events, often provides a base from which future interactions are anticipated and evaluated. Lanford (1986) claims that the first day of class provides the opportunity to establish the atmosphere and direction for the life of an academic course. Goffman (1967) suggests that "whenever the physical possibility of spoken interaction arises, it seems that a system of practices, conventions, and procedural rules come into play which functions as a means of guiding and organizing the flow of messages" (pp. 33-34). As a communication event, the first day of class may be seen as an opportunity for such "practices," "rules," and "conventions" to be initiated. Although both teacher and student play a role in creating the classroom environment (Friedrich & Cooper, 1990), the first day is an opportunity for teachers to establish their credibility, arouse interest in the subject matter, present teacher expectations, and to establish guidelines for future classroom communication and procedures.

Some literature is available which recommends specific first day activities, instructional strategies, and procedures (Bielawski, 1984; Ensz, 1988; Fraser, 1985; Friedrich &

Cooper,1990). Dorn (1987) and Smith (1985) suggest that in order to generate interest in the subject matter, first day activities should include classroom exercises relevant to course content. Similarly, Mugleston (1989) proposes the use of humorous anecdotes as a method of stimulating student interest in a history course, while Branon (1988) describes the utilization of small group work on the first day to introduce students to the concepts included in a language course for future professionals. Though this literature provides prescriptions for what instructors can do on the first day, it does not provide the information necessary to determine whether these first day procedures are perceived as successful by students and ultimately lead to satisfactory management of the classroom environment.

To date, information is not available which describes what actually occurs during initial classroom interaction on the university level. The current investigation is an attempt to provide normative data about the first day of class. The study describes the first day activities of multiple classrooms across the academy, offers descriptive data concerning student impressions of the first day, provides recommendations to instructors for future management of initial classroom interactions, and is based on the following research questions:

RQ1: What does an instructor provide as introductory information to the students during the first class session?

RQ2: What information related to course policies and procedures is provided by the instructor on the first day of class?

RQ3: What course content is conveyed on the first day of class?

RQ4: What type of personal information does an instructor disclose to students on the first day of class?

RQ5: What is the relationship between first day interaction and initial student satisfaction with a university course?

Method

Procedures

Data collection occurred during the first week of a 16 week semester at a large midwestern university. Students enrolled in an introductory communication course participated in the study; each student received classroom credit for his/her participation. On the first day of class, students were given a questionnaire to complete for one class they had not yet attended. Participants were asked to complete the questionnaire during or immediately following the first session

of their chosen class. Students were encouraged to return a copy of the course syllabus along with their completed questionnaire. Questionnaires not returned within the first week of the semester were discarded.

A total of 251 observations of 145 instructors representing 31 academic departments in 6 colleges are included in the survey. Colleges include: Arts and Sciences (89 classes), Business Administration (28 classes), Education (nine classes), Engineering (ten classes), Fine Arts (seven classes), and Geosciences (two classes). Classes observed include courses which meet for 50 minutes on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday (43%), 75 minutes on Tuesday and Thursday (36.1%), one day per week (11.5%), or one evening per week (6.9%). The remaining 2.5% did not specify class time.

The majority of the classes described (68%) were classified as "major requirements" by the student attending ; 68.9% (173) were taught by males and 29.1% (73) by females. Two percent (five) did not indicate the gender of the instructor. Only 17 respondents (6.9%) indicated that they had been in a class with this same instructor previously—ten of these indicated that this was the reason they were taking the current course.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of 31 closed and 10 open ended questions addressing four broad topic areas: (a) general information about the course, (b) information about the instructor, (c) questions concerning course mechanics, and (d) information about the content of the first day (see Appendix A).

Six questions collected course information such as course title and meeting time; 13 questions focused on student perceptions concerning the instructor's accessibility, organizational skills, and presentation style; ten questions pertained to the course mechanics of the first day, e.g., did the instructor discuss appropriate classroom behavior, distribute a course syllabus, etc. The remaining twelve questions emphasized the activities of the first day.

Open ended responses allowed students to justify their impressions of the course and the instructor. For example, respondents were asked if they perceived their instructor as organized or disorganized. They were then given the opportunity to describe the behaviors, messages, and actions of the instructor which supported their yes/no response by describing the things the instructor did that made the instructor appear organized/disorganized.

Data Analysis

All open ended responses were recorded on note cards by the researchers with one idea per card. These 2,132 open ended responses were divided into categories by one of the three researchers. This process was repeated by the other two researchers individually until agreement was reached by all three researchers. Once agreement was reached, the coding was assessed for intercoder reliability by two graduate students. A 94% agreement was reached for all open ended responses.

Responses to all questions were tabulated in order to assess frequency of response. Cross tabulations were utilized to discover relationships between student satisfaction with initial interactions and information/activities of the first day.

Results

The first research question explored introductory information provided by the instructor during the first class session. Students say that most instructors introduce themselves (233, 92.8%), announce the title of the course (213, 84.9%), provide students with a way to reach him/her outside of class (215, 85.7%), and discuss office hours (221, 88%). Additionally, 86.1% (216) of the instructors discuss the information in the course syllabus and 81.3% (204) convey course goals and objectives (see Table 1).

Research question two identified information pertaining to course policies and procedures. More specifically, this question targeted information surrounding classroom participation, upcoming assignments, and appropriate classroom behavior. Students indicate that 68.9% (173 surveys) of the instructors say that class participation is important, 27.1% (68) say participation is not important or participation was not discussed, and 4% (10) provided no response (see Table 1).

Upcoming assignments were addressed by two questions: (a) "were graded assignments discussed during class?" and (b) "did the instructor give you an assignment?" Results indicate that 65.3% (164 surveys) of the instructors discussed graded assignments, while 30.3% (76 surveys) did not—4.4% (11 surveys) provided no information. Only 56.2% (141 surveys) indicated that homework was assigned during the initial class meeting—37.8% (95 surveys) were not given an assignment and 6% (15 surveys) did not specify if an assignment was given (see Table 1).

Appropriate classroom behavior was discussed in 64.9% (163 surveys) of the classes (see Table 1). When asked what specific behaviors were discussed, students responded in terms of six categories: (a) general behavior, (b) attendance, (c) academic misconduct, (d) classroom participation,

(e) inappropriate classroom behaviors, and (f) miscellaneous. The "general behavior" category included responses such as "same as a usual instructor would," " we know this," and "we are responsible for our own actions." The "attendance" category included information about specific attendance policy, whether or not roll would be taken, and the importance of being in class on a regular basis.

"Academic misconduct" relates to the topics of cheating and plagiarism, while "classroom participation" included asking questions in class, participating in discussion, and raising your hand when you have a question. Behaviors that were considered "inappropriate" were such things as talking, reading newspapers, and bringing food or drink into the classroom. The "miscellaneous" category provided information pertinent to the course or instructor. For example, one instructor informed the students that he was hard of hearing, while another discussed assigned seating.

Respondents reported that 16.4% (41 surveys) of the teachers discussed general behavior, while 39.6% (99 surveys) addressed class attendance. Academic misconduct was considered important by 20.7% (52 surveys) and classroom participation by 13.1% (33 surveys). Other inappropriate classroom behaviors were identified in 12.7% (32 surveys) of

the classrooms, while 4% (10 surveys) provided a response that was classified as miscellaneous (see Table 2).

In terms of the third research question (what course content is conveyed on the first day?), 61.7% (153 surveys) said that the instructor lectured (see Table 1). Lectures most frequently included introductory material about the course (87.6% or 134 of the 153 that responded). The remaining 12.4% (19 of the 153 responding) said that their instructor gave a review, lectured on course mechanics, or lectured on first assignments. Additionally, 34.9%, or 84 of the 251 surveys, described a structured activity that occurred on the first day (see Table 1). Structured activities included the topics of: (a) course content, 19%, 16 of 84 surveys, (b) pretests, 16.7%, 14 of 84 surveys, (c) asked questions, 14.3%, 12 of 84 surveys, (d) getting acquainted, 38.1%, 32 of 84 surveys, and (e) completing information/index cards, 11.9%, 10 of 84 surveys (see Table 3).

Students were also asked if they perceived their instructor as "organized." Two hundred twenty respondents (87.6%) provided a positive response—24 claimed their instructor was unorganized (9.6%) and 7 (2.8%) provided no answer. The primary explanation for the perception that an instructor is organized relates to the presentation of clear course objectives, 78 responses, 31% and materials that were

handed out on the first day, 67 responses, 26.7%. Additionally, the instructor's presentation style (39 responses, 15.5%), the planned activities of the course (27 responses, 10.8%), and course mechanics (18 responses, 7.2%) were used to judge an instructor as organized (see Table 4).

Research question four focused on personal information disclosed by the instructor. Analysis of these responses reveal ten categories of instructor self-disclosure. Twenty-eight students (11.2%) claimed that their instructor informed them "where they were from," while sixty students (23.9%) said they disclosed information about their "educational background." Instructors also shared information pertaining to "teaching experience" (66 responses, 26.3%) and "career information" (47 responses, 18.7%). Four categories provided more personal information.

"Personality issues" such as attitude toward students—e.g., "no one in this class will get an 'A'," "he knows all the ways to cheat"—were reported by 5.6%, 14 respondents. This category also included items about the instructor's sense of humor and positive concern for students. "Family information" was provided to 6.4% or 16 of the students. Information about "personal life" included the age of the instructor, television viewing habits, and health problems (7.6%, 19 responses).

Eight (3.2%) of the respondents shared their hobbies with the class (see Table 5).

Course procedures—"she gives pop quizzes" and "everyone can feel free to ask questions"—were reported by ten respondents, 4% of the subject pool. The largest category which emerged related to lack of self disclosure by the instructor. Eighty-four students (33.5%) reported that their instructor revealed little or no personal information during initial interaction (see Table 5).

Two specific questionnaire items related to student satisfaction with initial interactions (research question five). The first question asked students to report whether they believed, based on their initial perceptions, they would enjoy interactions with their instructor. Of the 251 students responding, 215 (85.7%) provided a positive reply to this question, 31 (12.4%) offered a negative answer, and 5 (1.9%) did not indicate an impression. Eight categories appeared as explanations for this perception: (a) teacher experience, (b) teacher characteristics, (c) classroom format, (d) teacher use of humor, (e) teacher concern for students, (f) positive personality traits, (g) negative comments about the teacher, and (h) miscellaneous or unknowns.

"Teacher characteristics" captures such items as teacher presentation style and teacher interest in the subject matter.

"Positive personality traits" included statements such as "he appears friendly" or "she will be fair." "Negative comments" included items related to the teacher ("he was boring"), class size, and course content. "Miscellaneous" responses included issues of uncertainty and students hesitancy to make a judgment early in the semester.

Thirty-four students (13.5%) listed teaching experience as a reason for believing future interactions would be positive. Teacher characteristics were considered important by 120 respondents (47.8%), while 20 students (8%) believed classroom format would be an important issue. Humor was considered important by 33 (13.1%) of the participants and 58 (23.1%) viewed teacher concern for students as a significant item. Possessing positive personality traits was reported by 113 (45%). Only 30 (12%) made negative comments about the instructor. Thirty-four responses (13.5) fell into the miscellaneous category (see Table 6).

The second question asked respondents to rate, based on the first class meeting, how much they believed they would learn . One hundred fifty-eight (63.2%) believed they would learn "a great deal," while 52 (20.8%) thought they would learn "some." There were 27 students (10.8%) that were "unsure" how much would be learned, eight students (3.2%) claim they will learn "very little," five students (2.0%) will learn "nothing,"

and one individual did not respond. Explanation for these responses fell into six categories : (a) teacher credibility, 65, 25.9%, (b) teacher knowledge, 48, 19.1%, (c) student knowledge, 67, 27.1%, (d) negative comments, 17, 6.8%, (e) student interest in subject matter, 38, 15.1%, and (f) course content and procedures, 29, 11.6 % (see Table 7).

Cross tabulations reveal that of the 158 respondents claiming they will "learn a great deal," 143 (90.5%) also believe the instructor is organized and 128 of these respondents (81%) indicate that their instructor encourage class participation. Similarly, of the 215 (85.7%) students that believe they will enjoy future interactions with their instructor, 193 (89.8%) perceive the instructor as organized and 172 (80%) report that the instructor encourages participation(see Table 8).

Cross tabulations also indicate that those students with the highest degree of initial satisfaction, i.e., those believing they will enjoy future interaction, assert that the instructor self-disclosed more during the first class about: (a) where the instructor is from, 27 of 28 reporting, (b) educational background, 55 of 60 reporting, (c) teaching experience, 59 of 66 reporting, (d) career information, 44 of 47 reporting, (e) personality issues, 13 of the 14 reporting, (f) family information, 14 of the 16 reporting, (g) personal life, 15 of the

19 reporting, (h) hobbies, 6 of the 8 reporting, and (i) course procedures, 8 of the 10 reporting.

Sixty-seven students with a positive view of future interaction claimed that their instructor revealed little personal information. However, this category was the largest category for those who believed they would not enjoy future interactions, 15 of 31 reporting. When comparing percentages, only 31.2% of those with a positive response indicated that the instructor disclosed very little; 48.4% of those with a negative response provided the same answer.

Discussion

The results of the present study provide normative data on the first day of class in the university setting. Most instructors introduce students to their course by furnishing introductory information such as course title, instructor telephone numbers and office hours, and through the presentation of a syllabus and course goals and objectives.

Course policies and procedures are also presented on the first day through discussion of classroom participation, appropriate classroom behavior, and assignments for the course. The most prominent behavior discussed appears to be class attendance; instructors also choose to focus on academic misconduct and other inappropriate behaviors such as talking and reading while class is in session.

On the first day, a majority of instructors lecture. Few instructors find it necessary to provide a structured activity as a method of introducing students to new subject matter. Instructors supply students with a positive perception of their organizational abilities by presenting clear objectives, preparing course materials, through their presentation style, and by discussing the activities planned for the course. Though most instructors do not disclose personal information, the information which is disclosed most frequently relates to educational background and teaching experience. Perhaps, this information focuses on teacher credibility in the classroom. Instructors may feel a need to communicate credentials during this first interaction with students; disclosing personal information may be more appropriate at a later time.

Finally, these results indicate that the first day of class is a positive experience for most students. The majority of students believe they will enjoy interacting with their instructor and leave the class with a positive outlook concerning the amount of information they will learn during the course of the semester. Of particular interest is the fact that many students believe the amount they will learn is determined by their own knowledge and interest in a chosen subject. However, those students with a negative attitude most

frequently report that the instructor has presented him/herself in an unsatisfactory way.

This initial investigation possesses heuristic value. Through the collection of normative data, a knowledge base has been established from which future research can be conducted. Future research on the "first day of class" should explore not only student perceptions and views of what happens, but also the views of instructors. For example, if a student perceives an instructor an unorganized, does the instructor share this perception? Also, it is important to know how instructors in different disciplines teaching at different levels differ in terms of "first day" procedures. It would also be of interest to explore gender and cultural issues as they relate to the first day of class. After understanding descriptively what happens on the first day, future research should focus on methods or strategies instructors can use in making their first interaction more successful—thus making possible a prescriptive approach to teacher training. Issues such as student and teacher socialization, the establishment of teacher credibility, and teacher clarity and presentation style can all be addressed in the future in relationship to initial classroom interactions. Because our first interaction can determine the success of those to follow, it is important that instructional research explore

what happens in a particular setting prior to offering a prescriptive approach on how best to handle situations in the classroom.

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Table 1

General Information

Question	Responses yes	no	missing
Instructor introduced him/herself	233 (92.8%)	15 (6%)	3 (1.2%)
Announced course title	213 (84.9%)	36 (14.3%)	2 (0.8%)
Provided students a a way to reach instructor outside of class	215 (85.7%)	30 (12%)	6 (2.3%)
Discuss office hours	221 (88%)	26 (10.4%)	4 (1.6%)
Pass out syllabus	233 (92.8%)	16 (6.4%)	2 (0.8%)
Discuss syllabus	216 (86.1%)	19 (7.5%)	16 (6.4%)
Convey course goals	204 (81.3%)	35 (13.9%)	12 (4.8%)
Encourage participation	173 (68.9%)	68 (27.1%)	10 (4%)
Discussed graded assignments	164 (65.3%)	76 (30.3%)	11 (4.4%)
Discussed homework	141 (56.2%)	95 (37.8%)	15 (6%)
Discussed appropriate classroom behavior	163 (64.9%)	82 (32.7%)	6 (2.4%)
Lectured on the first day	153 (61%)	98 (39%)	
Had a structured activity	84 (33.5%)	157 (62.5%)	10 (4%)

Table 2

Classroom Behavior

Topic Discussed	Frequency/Percentage
General remarks concerning behavior	41 (16.4%)
Class attendance policy	99 (39.6%)
Academic misconduct	52 (20.7%)
Class participation	33 (13.1%)
Miscellaneous inappropriate behaviors	32 (12.7%)
Miscellaneous	10 (4 %)

percentages based on possible 251 responses

Table 3

Structured Activities

Type of Activity	Frequency/Percentage
Activities related to course content	16 (19%)
Pretests and surveys	14 (16.7%)
Instructor asked questions of the class	12 (14.3%)
Get acquainted activities	32 (38.1%)
Students completed personal information cards	10 (11.9%)

percentages based on the 84 persons claiming to participate in a structured activity on the first day.

Table 4

Organizational Categories

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Clear Course Objectives	78	31%
Course Materials	67	26.7%
Presentation Style	39	15.5%
Planned Activities	27	10.8%
Course Mechanics	18	7.2%

percentages based on 251 possible responses

Table 5

Instructor Self-disclosure

Category of Self-disclosure	Frequency/Percentage
Instructor stated where he/she was from	28 (11.2%)
Educational background	60 (23.9%)
Teaching experience	66 (26.3%)
Career information	47 (18.17%)
Personality issues	14 (5.6%)
Family information	16 (6.4%)
Personal life	19 (7.6%)
Hobbies	8 (3.2%)
Course Procedures	10 (4%)
Instructor disclosed little or no information	84 (33.5%)

percentages based on 251 responses

Table 6

Initial Interactions

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Teaching experience	34	13.5
Teacher characteristics	120	47.8
Classroom format	20	8.0
Humor	33	13.1
Teacher concern for student	58	23.1
Positive personality traits	113	45.0
Miscellaneous	34	13.5

percentages based on 251 possible responses

Table 7

Explanation for the amount they believe they will learn

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Teacher credibility	65	25.9
Teacher knowledge	48	19.1
Student knowledge	67	27.1
Student interest	38	15.1
Course content and procedures	29	11.6
Negative comments	17	6.8

percentages based on 251 possible responses

Table 8

Cross Tabulations

		learn a great deal	enjoy interactions
instructor seems organized	yes	143/158 (90.5%)	193/215 (89.8%)
	no	15/158 (9.5%)	22/215 (10.2%)
encouraged class participation	yes	128/158 (81%)	172/215 (80%)
	no	30/158 (19%)	43/215 (20%)